

The history, effectiveness, performance and future of the National Landcare Program, including:

The establishment and performance of the Natural Heritage Trust;

I have been involved in landcare since its inception in one way or another but since 1996 have been more involved in National Landcare Program which began with NHT1 when the group in 1996 applied for funding to employ a Landcare Officer to coordinate the on ground projects. This was followed by NHT2 funded from the sale of Telstra.

The application process and use of funds during the Natural Heritage Trust years was refined and improved following community consultation and was easy for community groups to follow and acquit. The investment by the government was matched by community, other partners and stakeholders in a ratio of one government dollar to four dollars from partnerships and other sources such as community volunteer time and funds from corporate sponsors.

The NHT program was accused of being the “vegemite” approach where the government funds are spread too thinly to achieve objectives. However, this is not the view I have. What it did was to build community acceptance and involvement in landcare. It took a little time for good projects to be viewed by others as an appropriate way to manage land and water assets, particularly the farming areas. It built onto the decade of Landcare by further building community capacity and supported the community groups that had good leadership and governance became a focus point of the community.

I have worked as an NRM officer and Landcare Centre coordinator since 1999 and know that our goals were achieved and I look at the proof of that statement on a daily basis.

Perhaps the collection of statistics and the reporting method was unsatisfactory to the government that they felt the program was not value for money. That, I think, was more to do with reporting outputs alone and not outcomes. I coordinate one of the groups that was used as a trial for the then government’s Performance Story Evaluation using the MERI process just before CfoC came in with the change in government. The Performance story told a different story to what government and critics were calling a failure to deliver. Acknowledging that not all projects were successful Australia wide and that considerable money disappeared into state government agencies for no obvious landcare outcome.

Landcare started as a grassroots program to enable the community to be involved and encourage farmers to use more sustainable methods of production that not only increased productivity but protecting natural habitats, biodiversity, and water quality.

The best move was the ability for community groups to be able to employ officers to do the paperwork, retain and encourage and reward volunteers for their work without the burnout of applying for grants and acquitting them, coordinating the on ground projects and ensuring they remained on track to achieve their objectives. Expecting volunteers to do tens of hours of paperwork and coordinating of projects just lead to burnout in the earlier years of landcare.

NHT2 was successful because it continued to build on the community capacity and improved knowledge of and understanding of landcare. The paperwork was also continually being reviewed to simplify the process.

The establishment and performance of the Caring for Our Country program

With the change in government, the pendulum of Caring for Our Country swung entirely the other way, to a more big picture scenario like removing all the camels and saving the Great Barrier Reef and other target areas. All very admirable but it left no funds for the smaller on ground community groups and if you were in the area that wasn't a targeted area; then tough.

Caring for Country did not recognise that community support and capacity would be lost. That previous years of landcare would not be built upon. The fact that the good brand name of Landcare was dropped as being outdated and tired made a mockery of the hard work done by countless people both as landholders, paid officers and volunteers for more than a decade previously. Community groups were shown to be "value for money" but now they had been made valueless. Many of the successful groups struggled on doing the best they could.

The government did consult with the community very well in the early years of the new government but the minister of the time could not or did not want to see that the broad, large scale focus of the Caring For Our Country Program excluded the myriad of small community groups that successfully carried out the on ground work year in and year out.

The outcomes to date and for the forward estimates period of Caring for Our Country

The outcomes to date of the Caring for Our Country in sustainable agriculture and environmental stewardship could be achieved in most cases. New governments always want to change programs to reflect their philosophies and ideology however, it important that funds committed for projects under the previous government be honoured to allow them to be brought to fruition then maybe use them to build on to the new programs.

The implications of the 2014-15 Budget for land care programs, in particular, on contracts, scope, structure, outcomes of programs and long-term impact on natural resource management

The budget will severely reduce the function of landcare and natural resource management. Very little funding is available to community groups for on ground projects although information has been disseminated that indicates a one-off small grant. Details are yet to be seen. This will reduce the ability of the community to undertake revegetation work and other nrm work.

One area that has been severely affected is the ability of community groups with a proven track record and good governance to source funds to continue to employ coordinators and project officers who drive natural resource management at a local level. This was funnelled through the Regional NRM groups but now these groups no longer seem to do this but do compete for the on ground work grants when long standing community groups used to do the work. Working to maintain partnerships with Local government, corporate and community requires skills and a knowledge of where landcare has come from and so landcare officers at the community level are very important.

The NHT2 model was the best model to date for community groups and with a little effort through the regional groups, the work could collectively be very strategic.

The Government's policy rationale in relation to changes to land care programs.....

As far as I have seen and heard it sounds good but the proof will be in the fine detail rather than the talk at the moment. Although, so far I see no way to deliver on the ground to the same extent as previously with no funds provided to employ community group NRM officers and little funds for revegetation.

However, the talk of "community driven" and "working from the bottom up" sounds encouraging. This was how the regional system was meant to work. Now it is driven from the top when eventually the regional groups were forced to toe the agency line... policies, guidelines, reporting until the groups have become just another bureaucracy.

How the Department of the Environment and the Department of Agriculture have, and can, work together to deliver a seamless land care program;

In the past, DoE and DAFFA worked together to deliver sustainable agriculture and landcare as well as biodiversity. This cannot be that difficult. Some biodiversity projects could and do contribute to sustainable agriculture outcomes. Guidelines can be written that identify projects as Agriculture and others as biodiversity

The role of natural resource management bodies in past and future planning, delivery, reporting and outcomes; and

Regional Groups should be community driven with Strategies that reflect a consultative approach to what is important locally.

Develop regional strategies that address local issues.

Recognise subregional groups by ensuring on-going support and high level lobbying to achieve their viability.

Have experienced NRM people on the committee/s that make the NRM decisions for investment.

Reporting should be based on a simplified MERI plan.

Any other related matters

A simplified MERI process against which reporting and evaluation reports can be developed. Not all outcomes achieved can be measured by outputs such as community capital or perceived environmental change.

The performance story program was an excellent evaluation tool but probably too expensive, however, maybe thought could be put into simplifying it. Performance evaluation could be a rolling review. Not done every year but say every three to five years.